

Mare Island Naval Shipyard

HAER No. CA-3

Near State Highway 37  
Vallejo  
Solano County  
California

HAER  
CAL,  
48-MARI,  
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record  
National Park Service  
Western Region  
Department of the Interior  
San Francisco, California 94107

Historic American Engineering Record

Mare Island Naval Shipyard

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Location: Southwest of and across Mare Island strait from the city of Vallejo, Solano County, California, and 1.5 miles Southeast of State Highway 37, where it bridges the Napa River.

UTM: 0564100-4217000

Quad: Mare Island

Date of Construction: circa 1855.

Present Owner: United States Navy  
Mare Island Naval Shipyard  
Vallejo, California 94592

Present Use: Naval Shipyard

Significance: Mare Island was established by Commander (later Admiral) David Glasgow Farragut as the first Naval base in California.

History

The history of Mare Island extends beyond the admission of California into the Union in 1850. Sailing vessels captained at the various times by Cabrillo, Vizcaino, Francis Drake, and Don Juan Perez De Ayala had ventured along the coastline for many years prior searching for the Seven Cities of Cibola. De Ayala, rather than finding the Seven Cities of Gold, found instead a river in the Sea, and sailed the San Carlos through a wide channel into the greatest estero ever seen by the eyes of Christian men. While sailing through what was later to be known as the San Francisco Bay, De Ayala spotted a long, low, flat island. With Spanish imagination, he named the island Isla Plana ("Flat Island"), and then departed. Fifty years later the flag of Spain vanished and was replaced by the Mexican emblem. The first recorded owner of the island was Victor Castro, who took title from the Mexican government. Castro eventually relinquished the title and the island passed through many hands.

During this period of time, the Mexican government decided that holding a garrison in the area of Sonoma would be beneficial for future control of California, and Mariano G. Vallejo and his family eventually settled there. He owned extensive land, as well as vast numbers of cattle and horses. It has been recorded that while a raft load of Vallejo's horses were being ferried northward across Carquinez Strait from Contra Costa County to Benicia, the raft overturned. One of the horses, a white mare, after being pulled westward by the currents, swam ashore and ended up on the island once named Isla Plana. She was discovered a few days later,

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and after her rescue, Vallejo changed the island's name to Isla De La Yegua ("Island of the Mare").

Upon admission of California into the Union in 1850, the United States recognized the need for the establishment of a Navy Yard in California to support the Pacific Squadron. To meet the end, Commander (later the Navy's first full Admiral) David Glasgow Farragut was selected by Commodore Joseph Smith, Chief of the Navy's Bureau of Docks and Yards, to establish a Naval Shipyard on Mare Island. This property had been surveyed by a board of Naval Officers headed by Commodore John Drake Sloat in 1852 and was purchased by the Navy from the Bissel-Aspenwell-McArthur Combine in January 1853 for \$83,491.00. The island when originally purchased consisted of approximately 990 acres bounded by the Mare Island Strait on the east, the Carquinez Strait on the South, San Pablo Bay on the west, and tules on the north.

On September 16, 1854, Commander Farragut, along with a Civil Engineer, a clerk, and their families, arrived on Mare Island to begin the task of establishing the Navy's first permanent installation on the West Coast. The initial plans for the construction of Mare Island Naval Yard were developed by Commodore Sloat's board during their survey conducted in 1852.

(See Also HABS CA-1543 for more information regarding the Mare Island Naval Shipyard)

Sources:

- 1) Lott, Arnold S., A Long Line of Ships, Annapolis, 1954.
- 2) Lemmon, Sue & Witchels, E.D., Sidewheelers to Nuclear Power, Annapolis, 1977.
- 3) Wichels, E.D., Draft history of Buildings 51, 53, & 55, 1978.
- 4) Grapevine Articles, various dates.